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SUBJECT: SLOVAK LOCAL ELECTIONS PREVIEW - DEC 2, VOL. II

REF: BRATISLAVA 914

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (SBU) This is the second of two pre-election cables outlining the candidates and issues in the Slovak local elections to take place on December 2. Contrary to previous municipal elections that followed local political trends, the alliances for this election reflect national coalition and opposition groupings. Many observers think that Smer candidates and those from the other coalition parties have improved these parties' prospects at the local level due to the strength and rising popularity of Prime Minister Robert Fico. Coalition parties' doling out of more job positions in regional and local offices than previously may also help. A belief that electing local figures from the ruling parties will get the municipality more resources flies in the face of the reality of greater decentralization of budgeting in Slovakia, but nevertheless can help those candidates. In three of the six largest cities (Kosice, Presov, and Banska Bystrica), candidates backed by the national coalition have a fair chance of unseating the incumbents. Smer victories at the local level would consolidate and further bolster the Prime Minister's popular mandate. The largest opposition party, SDKU (Social Democratic and Christian Union), appears resigned to a poor showing in the elections. Transportation is a major issue across the nation and unemployment remains a key concern in central and eastern Slovakia (reftel). Nation-wide polling indicates a voter turnout around 40 percent, with a lower percentage in the larger cities.

2. (SBU) Another trend is the mainstream approach taken by ethnic Romani candidates, mostly running for city council seats as independents or with mainstream parties rather than ethnic parties (see paragraph 15). Also worth noting is the increased, albeit still limited, attention that Romani issues are receiving from some non-Romani candidates. The Embassy PAS has provided a small grant to local election observation NGO "Civic Eye" to watch the issue of candidates "buying" Roma votes. Several Emboffs will join this observation effort in line with our MPP goal of furthering the political integration of the Romani community. END SUMMARY/COMMENT.

3. (SBU) Emboffs have traveled extensively in the run-up to the December 2 elections. We offer snapshots of the local races in the larger and most interesting cities to help explain Slovak political culture. See reftel for highlights from eastern Slovak cities and the legal and fiscal structure of these elections.

BRATISLAVA: POLITICALLY CONSERVATIVE CAPITAL

4. (SBU) Andrej Durkovsky of KDH (Christian Democratic Movement) with the joint support of SDKU, appears to be a shoe-in for re-election as mayor of the half million citizens of Slovakia's capital city despite what frustrated SDKU

officials consider a lackluster campaign by an overconfident incumbent. KDH has held the Bratislava mayoral slot for nearly all of the post-communist era and the prosperous region remains an overall supporter of center-right candidates. Durkovsky's main challenger, Monika Flasikova-Benova of Smer, also a Member of the European Parliament, just barely received her own party's support after publicly criticizing the party for entering a national coalition with Vladimir Meciar's HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) and the far-right SNS (Slovak National Party). Despite her comments, her candidacy is also supported by HZDS, SMK (Party of the Hungarian Coalition), SF (Free Forum), and the Green Party. Flasikova-Benova's campaign is being run by her newlywed husband Fedor Flasik, an experienced campaign manager with a nevertheless poor track record who received the blame in 1998 for HZDS's failure to win the national elections and again in 2002 for the same reason with Smer. The candidate herself told Poloffs that she believes this year's mayoral campaign will help her name recognition four years from now. While her husband denied that KDH mayors have done anything for the booming city other than add a few buildings and statues, Flasikova-Benova did not offer any specifics on how she would improve Bratislava's future if elected.

ZILINA: SLOTA'S KINGDOM UNDER SIEGE?

15. (SBU) In Zilina, Slovakia's fifth largest city located in the northern part of the country with 87,000 inhabitants, four-time mayor and chairman of SNS Jan Slota is expected to win a fifth term in office. His candidacy is backed by his partners in the national ruling coalition, Smer and HZDS. Despite his likelihood of being re-elected, Slota is facing his most serious mayoral challenge to date from an unusually

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cohesive right-of-center coalition. SDKU, KDH, OKS (Civic Conservative Party), and SF (Free Forum) have nominated 39 year-old professional politician Ivan Harman. Two other minor candidates are also running.

16. (SBU) The slogan for Harman's campaign is "Change" and billboards in his favor are widespread throughout the city. vast array of NGOs and civic associations, with concerns ranging from the environment to transparency to tolerance, are backing Harman despite what they claim is the risk to their own continued existence if Slota is successful. In a meeting with Emboffs, however, few of Harman's backers believed that their candidate will succeed. The main obstacle is the impression among many city residents that Slota is responsible for the impressive growth and development that Zilina has experienced since he was elected that first post-communist mayor in 1990. One local businessman explained that Slota runs Zilina like a fiefdom, with businesses paying fealty and needing his blessing to operate successfully. The united opposition's campaign efforts are so large that, according to a source in the billboard industry, no billboard space was left in the city by the time Slota's campaign got around to calling advertising agencies. From another perspective, Slota's supporters claim that there is no need for him to invest heavily in the campaign given his popularity.

NITRA: THREE CANDIDATES PILLOW FIGHT TO THE FINISH

17. (SBU) In Nitra, which barely edges out Zilina as Slovakia's fourth largest city, Poloffs met November 8 with the three leading candidates, all of whom have equal chances, advantages, and disadvantages. Current mayor Ferdinand Vitek is running as an independent; he was kicked out of SDKU and replaced on their ballot with a former hockey personality who is a distant fifth in polls. No one would tell us why Vitek and SDKU parted ways, not even Vitek himself. NGO leaders praised Vitek's accomplishments, but criticized his arrogance

when dealing with the public. Smer and SNS are supporting Jozef Dvonc, and of course he has the biggest, snazziest and most billboards in the race. He gave the impression of being someone who would cooperate across party lines to improve life in Nitra, where transportation is one of the biggest problems since highways running North-South and East-West cut through the city center. Finally, former mayor Jozef Prokes is running with the support of various small parties including the "nationalist-light" version of SNS. Prokes has the support of many older citizens and those to whom he has personal connections dating decades back when his father was an important figure in the city. We were pleasantly surprised by the progressive attitudes we found in Nitra, including educated opinions on Roma issues, and a positive outlook toward the U.S. The city's population has contracted in recent years as some have moved away to take jobs elsewhere, and with a new SONY plant coming online, unemployment is down and spirits are up. The campaign therefore is mild, and the outcome very uncertain.

BANSKA BYSTRICA: SMER MAY UNSEAT INDEPENDENT INCUMBENT

18. (SBU) Nine candidates are competing for the mayor's position in Banska Bystrica, a city of 82,000. Emboffs met with the top three: Jan Kralik, the independent incumbent; Ivan Saktor, Smer's nominee who has a national reputation from his ten years as head of the Confederation of Labor Unions, a job he vacated only weeks ago; and Jan Chladny, the SDKU candidate who comes across as cold as his name. Saktor, the primary challenger, is running under the slogan "Only an influential (well-connected) mayor can implement Bystrica's needs." Saktor's campaign illustrates Smer's election machine. Each of his 500 Smer activists is supposed to garner 20 votes for him. Campaign team members are to be paid for the votes they bring in. While voting is by secret ballot, Saktor claims his team will be able to show the votes they brought in. The incumbent Kralik hopes to win re-election based on his past accomplishments and continued beneficial contacts, despite public criticism for allegedly shady business deals. Local observers give the Smer-backed Saktor a good chance of unseating the incumbent while the SDKU candidate poses little threat.

TRNAVA: ARCHBISHOP'S TOWN LIKELY TO RE-ELECT KDH MAYOR

19. (SBU) Sometimes called "Little Rome" as the seat of Slovakia's Catholic Archbishop, Trnava is home to 70,000 people. Its longterm mayor, Stefan Bosnak from KDH with the support of SDKU, will likely win re-election. During his current term in office, Peugeot signed a contract, built a factory, and came online to full production. The Peugeot

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plant now employs about 3300 locals, including notable amounts of women and Roma. (COMMENT: Even a mere handful of full-time Roma employees, as is apparently the case in the Peugeot factory, is note-worthy in Slovakia. END COMMENT.) Local unemployment has dropped below five percent. Challenger Stefan Krizan, a member of SF with support from Smer-HZDS-SNS, is basing his campaign on the need to improve local transportation and that, with links to the national coalition, he is better connected to help the city.

TRENCIN: CENTER-RIGHT INCUMBENT HOLDING STEADY

110. (SBU) Trencin, with a population of 59,000, lies 80 miles northeast of Bratislava, near the Czech border. It is a prosperous town with a diversified economy and low unemployment. The primary campaign issue is transportation, both the roads and railways require substantial repair. Two of the five candidates have a realistic chance to win: the incumbent Branislav Celler of SDKU, running on behalf of SDKU and KDH, and Oto Barborak, a Smer party member running on

behalf of the national coalition partners Smer-HZDS-SNS. Though Trencin region has been a HZDS stronghold, Trencin city is traditionally dominated by center-right parties. Mayor Celler is confident of his re-election as well as retaining a center-right majority in the city council. Celler has lengthy experience in public and private sector administration, a qualification considered important by local political observers. In contrast, the main challenger has no experience in government or politics. Barborak, a professor at Trencin University, says his campaign is focused on improved communication with the citizens, economic development, and stopping the sale of municipal property. Barborak indicated to Emboffs that he is concerned that the vote count could be manipulated in favor of the incumbent, but provided no details to substantiate this concern. His own coalition is represented in all district electoral commissions and an NGO watchdog will send a monitoring team to the city. (COMMENT: Barborak did not come across as well-prepared when speaking with Emboffs. Even the HZDS regional governor acknowledged that Barborak is not a compelling candidate. END COMMENT.)

¶11. (SBU) The Governor of Trencin region, Pavol Sedlacek from HZDS, expects Smer to be disappointed with election results across Trencin region. He explained that many successful mayors elected in the past for SDL (Party of the Democratic Left, which Robert Fico left in 1999 in order to form Smer - SDL was subsumed into Smer in 2005) were rejected and replaced by new Smer candidates who are neither known nor well-accepted in their communities.

¶12. (SBU) Puchov, a town of 19,000 located in Trencin region, most recently made headlines for attempting to forcibly relocate several Romani families to a neighboring town. Puchov's independent mayor, Marian Michalec, is running for a third time. Although Puchov has economically developed and prospered during Michalec's tenure, the opposition coalition alleges that he governs in an authoritarian style and is loathe to release even the most basic information. Michalec has been the subject of multiple unproven allegations of corruption. SDKU, KDH, and an independent grouping support challenger Marcela Kadrliakova. The opposition acknowledges that it will be an uphill battle to unseat the current mayor, who has the support of the two largest employers in town, the tire manufacturers Matador and Continental.

KOMARNO: IN THE ETHNIC HUNGARIAN REGION

¶13. (SBU) Media reports from Komarno, a largely ethnic Hungarian town with 38,000 residents located on Slovak-Hungarian border, indicate that some members from SMK (Party of the Hungarian Coalition) are worried that the five ethnic Hungarian candidates for mayor may split the vote so much that the lone ethnic Slovak candidate could take the election. Three days before voters go to the polls, SMK asked the weakest ethnic Hungarian candidates to pull out. It is unlikely that candidates other than ethnic Hungarians would actually win in majority Hungarian towns.

BANSKA STIAVNICA: TIME FOR A CHANGE

¶14. (SBU) The beautiful UNESCO heritage site of Banska Stiavnica, a former boomtown that mined silver and gold, is the site of an interesting race. Current mayor Marian Lichner is an old communist who is now completing his fourth four-year term. His main supporters are retired people and workers who lost their mining and tobacco-factory jobs in the 1990's and now long for the good old days. On the other side are a series of candidates who criticize Lichner's

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lackadaisical management style, chaotic and ineffective city services, and a complete lack of development, including a stagnating ski resort project. The opposition candidates

include a hockey-playing traffic cop popular among youth, the principal of the high school, and the director of the local unemployment office. The last candidate has the support of the SDKU and many local business leaders, and seems quite sure of his chances. The plethora of opposition candidates may well divide the anti-Lichner vote and ensure him a fifth term.

ROMANI CANDIDATES: POTENTIAL FOR CITY COUNCIL SEATS

15. (SBU) The National Democratic Institute (NDI) reports that it is pleased with the campaigns of the ethnic Romani candidates it provided political training for. About ten of its trainees are running for city council spots in central and eastern Slovakia, some independently and others with mainstream parties, including Smer, SDKU, and KDH. NDI research shows that more Roma are running for office in more municipal districts than ever before. The organization estimates that over 1000 Romani candidates are running for mayor or town council in several hundred towns and villages, almost all of which have less than 1000 inhabitants. The largest cities with Romani city council candidates are Presov (Roman Estacok, independent), Banska Bystrica (Andrea Buckova, independent), and Ruzomberok (Viera Kroskenova, KDH). A win in any of these cities would be the highest-level elected office held by a Rom in a seat requiring a substantial amount of non-Romani votes. (NOTE: Romani candidates have previously been elected as mayors and council members of villages. A Rom has been elected to the Kosice city council based on a district comprised solely of the Romani housing complex "Lunik 9". END NOTE.) NDI released a report highlighting that, largely due to poor performance of ethnic Romani political parties in past elections, Romani civic groups were encouraging Romani candidates to cooperate with mainstream parties. NDI supports this strategy and notes that Romani issues are more widely discussed in mainstream political debates and platforms now compared to four years ago.

VALLEE